

IS CHURCH ATTENDANCE OPTIONAL?

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, August 28, 2011

You probably know a number of Christians who attend church infrequently or not at all. Some of them may have had bad experiences with a pastor or church members. Some may think the people who go to church are hypocrites. Some people think they're not "good enough" to go to church. Others complain that the church only wants their money. A few are afraid of feeling obligated to go once they start. Quite a few say that Sunday morning is the only day they can sleep in. Still others work or have kids in sports on Sunday mornings. Some count televised church services or Internet chat rooms as their church attendance. Some teens and young adults think church services are too boring. Finally, some individuals don't go to church because their spouse or family members won't go with them.

These days it seems the prevailing attitude is that church attendance is optional. With Christian programming aired 24/7 on television, radio, and the Internet, many people feel there's no need to physically attend a church service. Why not worship at home?

With so many reasons not to go to church, why should we make a big deal about it? After all, going to church isn't going to save us, right? Right.

What if I don't go every Sunday?

What if I prefer Saturday? (Isn't that the 'real' Sabbath day?)

What if I don't go at all?

What about midweek meetings?

What if I go to a 'house church'?

Is attending church even necessary?

You may have bounced such questions around in your brain at one point or another. And I think they are all questions worth considering. But underneath those questions are other questions...and those are the more important ones:

What is the purpose of attending church services?

Can that purpose be fulfilled in any other way?

What is gained or lost from not attending?

What does it take to constitute church?

A pastor tweeted something about Christians being deceived into thinking that weekly church attendance is optional. One follower wisely replied, "Everything is optional...but everything has consequences!"

Of course, we *would gain something* by not attending church, or others would not be so eager to do so. What do we stand to gain by skipping church? (Time to rest and relax, keep the money we might otherwise give away, avoid local church politics, believe what we want, dress the way we want...)

Equally important to ask is, What do we stand to lose?

Good Reasons

There are six good reasons for attending church regularly. I particularly like a list provided by pastor's wife, Donna Shepard.

1. The church is an unrivaled **means of support**. When you are in need—whether physically, emotionally, financially, or spiritually—there is no more powerful source of strength on earth than the church.
2. The church is a great **source of fun and friendship**. Whether you enjoy meeting with friends, eating with friends, camping with friends, or playing with friends—good friends can be found in church.
3. The church provides a simple **means of worshiping** with other believers. The Bible says wherever two or more have gathered in His name, Jesus is present with them (Matthew 18:20). It can be problematic to gather in His name at home, due to varying schedules and other needs. If you don't go to church, at best, worship is likely to happen sporadically, and with distractions.
4. The church provides **teaching and encouragement from God's Word**. Of course, you can study the Bible outside the church. You can even do so online, all by yourself! This kind of study can be enriching. But there is nothing like being able immediately to ask questions and receive the encouragement of others who have experienced God's Word at work in their lives.
5. The church provides a **means of remaining in Christ and bearing fruit**. John 15:5 tells us that unless we are a part of Christ's body, we will not bear fruit (described in Galatians as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, goodness, and self-control). If we are not significantly fruitful, we will not provide a strong example to others who observe our lives—family, friends, and co-workers. Who among us couldn't stand to bear more fruit? But how shall we remain in Christ? John 6:56 tells us how. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him." This takes place in corporate communion.
6. The church can give its members a **means of serving and finding purpose**. Ephesians 2:10 tells us that we were created to do good works. Surely the church is not the only place to do good works, but that doesn't mean it isn't a good place to start! Serving in church will help you to build dozens of relationships that can enrich your life. The church can also help you discover and fulfill your God-given purpose—your mission in life.

Bible, or Tradition?

Dr. Robert Morey takes another approach, considering that many Christians lack a Biblical purpose (and, therefore, lack a strong enough purpose) for assembling together. He contrasts (merely) traditional reasons with Biblical purposes in six areas, in the hopes of strengthening our convictions about the matter.

With respect to the **primary audience**, he asserts that many church traditions suggest "church is for lost sinners." In contrast, though sinners may also be among us, church is primarily for the saints—the people of Christ.

Acts 2:42-47

⁴² *All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.*

⁴³ *A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders.* ⁴⁴ *And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had.*

⁴⁵ *They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need.* ⁴⁶ *They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—⁴⁷ all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.*

Human traditions often make the **primary focus** of church gatherings lessons on “how to be saved,” when it should be what to believe and how to live as Christ-followers. Getting saved is incidental, being more usually what happens “in the field” between Sundays; Sunday services provide the public celebration of God’s work in us and through us during the previous week.

Traditionally, the **primary goal** of assembling together is measured by “decisions for Christ,” when it should instead be the transformation of lives through discipleship. Jesus did not send us to “make decisions,” but to make disciples.

A **primary emphasis** of ministry in many churches (and, therefore, of funds and personnel) has been “holding services and making altar calls,” instead of helping individuals and families to live as Christians.

By many traditions, the **primary purpose** of the church’s meetings is for “evangelism” to take place; Biblically, it should be for equipping the saints to serve God in their daily lives.

Morey concludes by suggesting that the traditional **standard of success** has been the “number of decisions recorded,” instead of the Biblical measure of Christian growth and maturity.

(Dr. Robert Morey)	Tradition	Bible
Primary Audience	Lost sinners	The saints (Acts 2:41-42)
Primary Focus	How to be saved	What to believe; How to live
Primary Goal	Decisions for Christ	Lives transformed
Primary Emphasis	Services; altar calls	Individuals & families
Primary Purpose	Evangelism	Equipping the saints
Standard of Success	Number of decisions	Christian growth and maturity

Let’s take some time this morning to see some of what the Bible does offer regarding the value of attending the services of a Christ-exalting, Bible-based, and Spirit-led church.

Centrality of Worship

Gathering for worship has always been central to God’s revealed plan for His people. When He gave them a land to call their own, He revealed His presence in the city of Jerusalem, in the Tent of Meeting (first established under Moses’ leadership), the Tabernacle of David, and later the permanent Temple of Solomon. As long as the worship of Yahweh (Jehovah) was the centerpiece of the Jewish lifestyle, God blessed His people with abundance and peace. When they abandoned Jerusalem to worship other Gods or simply live for themselves, their economy would collapse and enemies would invade.

As a side note, 70% of the Jews who now live “in the Land” are thoroughly secular in their lifestyles. It should be no wonder that they are plagued by troubles.

Let’s Not

A similar principle applies to God’s people today—the Church of Jesus Christ. Let’s camp for a few minutes in Hebrews, chapter ten.

Hebrews 10:19-25

¹⁹ And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven’s Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. ²⁰ By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the

*Most Holy Place.*²¹ And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God's house,²² let us go right into the presence of God with sincere hearts fully trusting him. For our guilty consciences have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water.

²³ Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise.²⁴ Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works.²⁵ And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.

Here is one "salad" that you really must eat!

(Lettuce) go right into the presence of God

(Lettuce) hold tightly to the hope we affirm

(Lettuce) think of ways to motivate one another

(Lettuce) not neglect our meeting together

All of these are corporate activities, things we do together: "let us." Together we go right in, together we hold tightly to our hope, together we motivate one another, and together we meet and encourage one another.

I know you can have a "streaming" experience online, watch religious TV programs, and chat online with other believers, and never leave the comfort of your home, but that is not what the Bible describes as "church."

Called to Be Together

The Greek word for church, *ecclesia*, means a group gathered, called to come together.

The word translated "neglect" (in verse 25) is taken from three Greek words which could be translated "out," "down," and "behind." They describe someone who feels left out, spiritually and emotionally let down, and left far behind everyone else.

The moment you begin to feel like that Satan whispers, "Just stay home from church today, you're not fit to go down there with all those good people."

If Satan can isolate you from other believers at the very time when you need them most, he will rob you of God's blessing and purpose! Sure you could stay home and read your Bible or turn on Christian radio or television to survive, but if, instead, you get into the midst of your spiritual family (your church) and go right into the presence of God, you'll get answers, experience joy, and receive encouragement that you can't find anywhere else.

Left out, let down, and left behind are the exact opposite of what God intends for you, and what His church (and yours) will provide if you make it your habit to meet together.

Taking an active role in the life of the church, then, brings us into God's presence and produces sincere faith and clear consciences (verse 22), builds strong confidence in God (verse 23), stimulates us all to act in love and goodness (verse 24), and produces spiritual courage for these last days (verse 25).

We can begin to see that church attendance is not just a smart thing, it is a necessary thing. Those who forsake the habit of church involvement exhibit the very opposite tendencies: their faith grows shallow and guilt increases, their confidence in God wavers (some abandon it), they become more selfish, and they become increasingly more discouraged about life.

Good Groundwork

1 Timothy 3:14-15

¹⁴ *I am writing these things to you now, even though I hope to be with you soon,* ¹⁵ *so that if I am delayed, you will know how people must conduct themselves in the household of God. This is the church of the living God, which is the pillar and foundation of the truth.*

Christianity is not simply a religion, that it should be patronized or may be left alone. It is a new race, a global nation. It is the people of the Living God; He is our God and we are His people; He dwells with us and we live in Him.

If you take away the church, you remove the pillar and support of the truth in your life and in your world. Collapse of faith is inevitable. One cannot forsake the assembly of God's people and remain strong in the truth.

We Belong Together

Luke 22:19-20

¹⁹ *He took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this to remember me."*

²⁰ *After supper he took another cup of wine and said, "This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood, which is poured out as a sacrifice for you.*

These commands of Jesus refer to Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper. The pronouns, "you," are both in the plural form—this also is an activity for the group, the church, not an individual. The early church, directed by the Lord's apostles, met regularly for worship and communion. It was not, and is not, a communion with God alone but also necessarily with His people, the body of Christ (see Paul's warnings in this regard in 1 Corinthians 11:29). Whoever neglects the assembly disregards this command.

Elsewhere, Jesus said, "*I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have eternal life within you* (John 6:53). While some might wish to argue that this may not refer directly to the Lord's Supper, nowhere else in the Christian walk is "eating His flesh" and "drinking His blood" so clearly fulfilled. The person who neglects the assembly forsakes the remembrance that He commanded. It won't be long before the condition of "no eternal life" becomes evident.

Remove a fish from the water. It may flop around on the shore for awhile, but ultimately it will die. Remove a coal from the fireplace. It may glow red for awhile, but ultimately it will die. Remove a Christian from the assembly of other Christians and, though he may continue in faith for awhile, ultimately he, too, will die. Perhaps even without Christ!

Pictures of Togetherness

According to the New Testament:

- The church is like a body; every part is needed.
- The church is like a family; every member belongs.
- The church is like a temple; everyone has been fitted together.

Jesus commanded us to love each other as he has loved us (John 13:34-35). This proves to the world around us that we are truly following Him. However, you cannot—you do not—love people whom you do not spend time with nor communicate with.

What To Do?

If you have not been regular in participating with the church, what should you do?

1. **Decide to return immediately.** Make this a permanent decision, not a weekly choice.
2. **Adjust your schedule** so that regular participation in the church is a part of your lifestyle. If your work schedule makes this difficult or impossible, share this problem with the church leaders. They can pray with you for a healthy change.
3. **Return to the assembly.** Church attendance is not an optional matter. It is a way of life. Make it your habit.

Wishful Thinking

I've heard many people say they can worship at home...and yes, they can. But will they? Likely not. As members of a church we are part of a group that can help encourage and hold us accountable. It is also the most effective way for us to participate in the Great Commission. It is not that we can't witness or disciple others on our own, but again, will we routinely? And again, likely not. I fully understand going through a transition in life; having a bad experience with a church and wanting a break; health problems...the list can go on. However, if you have no good reason for not attending regularly, maybe a heart examination is in order.

Million Dollar Question

Is church attendance optional? Or, is it

- Essential to living the will of God?
- Essential to reaching the lost?
- Essential to promoting revival?
- Essential to personal spiritual growth?
- Essential to bringing the Kingdom of God?
- Essential to adorning the Bride of Christ?

I believe it is essential in all those points. Church is absolutely necessary for those that are journeying to Christ's Kingdom, both those who know that they are and those who do not know it yet!

One more thing to consider (thanks to Melanie Wilson): in heaven, church won't be an optional thing; it'll be the only thing.